

USF dedicates new downtown Joliet facility



The University of St. Francis (USF) dedicated the Robert W. Plaster Free Enterprise Center in downtown Joliet on Monday, April 6.

The former theater building is named in honor of philanthropist and entrepreneur, the late Robert W. Plaster, and “in recognition of a significant six-figure gift by The Robert W. Plaster Foundation,” according to USF President Arvid C. Johnson.

Since opening for classes last August, the Plaster Center has generated enthusiasm in the downtown area. Most recently, Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner visited the center on March 27 to speak before business and community leaders. Joliet City Center Partnership awarded the university its first Downtown Joliet Appreciation Award – Professional Institution of the Year in March.

The April 6 dedication celebration will be very much in the spirit of the late Plaster, who sought to promote the benefits of free enterprise through the support of higher education. Area business and community leaders will gather with USF faculty and students for an Entrepreneurs Round Table Lunch and Discussion on the challenges and rewards of entrepreneurship and the benefits of free enterprise, including support of community social services. This will provide USF business and entrepreneurship students with a significant real-world learning experience, said Johnson.

“The educational experience of USF students is very much aligned with the values of Robert W. Plaster. As Mr. Plaster understood and valued hard work and education as the key to success, so, too, do University of St. Francis students and faculty,” said Johnson. “Also, just as Mr. Plaster was the first in his family to attend college, USF is proud to regularly welcome freshman classes of which more than 60 percent are first-generation college students.”

Born during the Great Depression and the first in his family to attend college, Plaster understood and valued hard work and education as the key to success, according to Dolly Clement, executive director of The Robert

W. Plaster Foundation and Plaster's daughter. The Robert W. Plaster Foundation is headquartered in Lebanon, Mo.

Plaster's success is evidence of his hard work and perseverance—from his boyhood paper route and grocery store job to work for the U.S. Treasury Department and later a propane company—that led to his own start-up business, Empire Gas Corporation, in 1963. Empire Gas rapidly became one of the largest retail LP gas distributors in the United States and was listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

After selling Empire Gas in 1996, Mr. Plaster founded Evergreen Investments, LLC.

Plaster was also co-founder and active supporter of Enactus, at that time known as Students in Free Enterprise. USF's College of Business & Health Administration recently established a chapter to become a member of Enactus' worldwide network of students, academic professionals and industry leaders.

"After achieving financial success my father felt very strongly that he wanted to help open educational opportunities for young people," added Clement. "To that end, in 1983, he established the Robert W. Plaster Foundation which is dedicated to helping students by funding projects for colleges and universities, such as this University of St. Francis enterprise, the former Mode Theater Building, now a state-of-the-art learning environment."

BMO Harris Bank donated the former Mode theater building, to the University of St. Francis in fall 2012. The university has since invested more than \$2.7 million to renovate the interior and exterior of the building. In February, the BMO Harris Bank Community Room was dedicated to honor the bank for its contribution to the university and downtown Joliet, according to Johnson.

USF also operates its Arts & Design programs and a gallery at the Rialto Square Theatre in downtown Joliet. USF's downtown Joliet facilities combine to form the university's St. Bonaventure Campus.

The University of St. Francis, in Joliet, Ill., has 46,000 alumni throughout the country. USF serves 3,400 students nationwide, offering undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs in arts and sciences, business, education, nursing, health care and social work. For information, call (800) 735-7500 or visit www.stfrancis.edu.

Media Inquiries:

Nancy Pohlman, Executive Director of Community Relations
(815) 740-3379 | npohlman@stfrancis.edu